

HUMAN RELATIONS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

[Text of the public lecture delivered under the auspices of the Indian Institute of Public Administration on the 20th December, 1960 by Prof. Charles S. Ascher, Associate Director, Institute of Public Administration, New York City (U.S.A.). Shri V.T. Krishnamachari, Deputy Chairman, Planning Commission, presided.]

In introducing me, Professor Menon has recited quite a number of posts that I have held over the last four decades. I recall an interesting insight into comparative administration that I gained when I was in the Office of the Director-General of UNESCO. If a candidate presented himself for employment at UNESCO from the United States, unless he had at least six or seven different employments in his record, they would say: What is the matter with this man? Has he no initiative? If a man from Europe presented himself for employment and he had more than one or two previous employments in his record, they would say: What's the matter with him? No competence? No stability?

Our Director suggested that the title for my talk should have been "How to be Human, Though an Administrator". I gladly accept this suggestion.

Some years ago, one of the international societies with which I work prepared a report for the United Nations on public relations of the administrator. It had been drafted by an able *functionnaire* in a ministry of a French-speaking European country. I was asked to comment on the manuscript. The first paragraph caused me worry: how could I comment without creating an international incident?

This manual began with the proposition that the state is *imperium*; accordingly, every *functionnaire* carries in his bosom a spark of *imperium*. Accordingly, his relations with the citizen will be those of superior and subordinate. I finally bethought me that if the author would just translate

fonctionnaire into English, he would perhaps see the different point of view in the tradition in which I have been brought up : *fonctionnaire* becomes not master, but civil servant. Here is another interesting contrast in approach between some of the continental countries of Europe and the Anglo-American tradition.

At the International Conference on Administrative Sciences that Prof. Menon and I attended in Italy in June 1960, I chatted with an American friend who is now adviser on public administration to the Deputy Prime Minister of Iran. My American friend told me that after two years in Iran he had gained enough confidence to venture a speech in Farsi (Persian) to an assembly of Iranian civil servants. He began with a quotation from the great Persian poet Hafiz : "The shepherd is for the sheep, the sheep are not for the shepherd". So, perhaps, my tradition is not solely Anglo-American.

In my own experience as a civil servant, when I was responsible for a staff of several hundred in thirty-eight different cities, I watched sharply the approaches to the citizen and I discovered in our field offices and in the offices of other organs of the United States government, that the official at the counter with the citizen before him would say : "You can't have it. I don't know why. The rules are made in Washington." Or he would say : "Our ministry would love to help you but it is these stupid officials in another ministry who have set these limitations : it is their fault that we cannot give you what you want." It was reported to me that one of my own field agents had told a group of local officials, "you are going to have public housing in your town whether you want it or not".

In my own country I have had the experience of cooling my heels for half an hour in the outer office of an official with whom I supposed that I had an appointment—except that the clerk in the outer office would not announce my presence to his superior. When I finally got in, the official said : "Where have you been, I have been waiting for you." Apparently the clerk in the outer office felt that it was his duty to protect his Chief against any contacts with the public.

II

I begin a discussion of "How to be Human Although an Administrator" with a few of these examples without the least idea that anything like this has ever happened in India but simply to make you aware that things like this happen in my country.

I recall an episode when the Mayor of a small town came to my office in the National Housing Agency with a delegation of members of his town council to plead for the release for use in his town of building materials so that the contractors could build homes. He was clearly a man of parts, in fact a successful manufacturer. He was the unpaid Mayor. I took the occasion to read him a lecture suggesting that there was a war going on, that we needed these scarce materials for aeroplanes and battleships, that we could afford to use them for housing only where it was essential for the war; his was clearly not such a community.

The Mayor asked just one question : "If we can't have materials to build houses in our town, will the same prohibition apply to the towns around us?" I assured him that it would. At this point he turned to his fellow councillors and said, "Gentlemen, it is a pleasure to find an official who knows that there is a war going on". In short, he was prepared to accept "no" for an answer if there was a reason given that he could understand and if he was sure that his "no" applied equally to others similarly situated without favouritism.

I recently got evidence confirming my view from a quarter where I did not expect to find it. I noted with interest this afternoon in the library of this Institute copies of some studies carried out recently in the United States on the management of mental hospitals. I reviewed several of these books for the (U.S.) Public Administration Review.¹ The editor entitled this essay "Aren't We All?" because it appeared that in running mental hospitals the same problems arise as lie outside. The social scientists who carried out these studies observed : "There was little or no serious

1. Vol. XVII, No. 4, Autumn 1957, p. 264.

protest against most rules...in contrast, many patients protested many times against rules *not* being enforced, including those restricting their own activities...protests...were likely to appear...when the necessity for rules was not self-evident or when they appeared to be primarily for the hospital's benefit.

"Patients rarely objected to the use of force *per se*. Occasionally they requested it... But many patients did object to the use of force as a substitute for listening to the patient's attempted explanation of his problem.

"Patients have expressed deep appreciation for repeated explanation as one of the most important factors to which in retrospect they attributed their improvement."²

I urge therefore that as administrators we should never be afraid to say 'no' if we can make the citizen feel that there is a justifiable reason why he should not be free to do what he wants. I used to say to my field staff: "If we have failed adequately to explain to you the reason for the regulation limiting freedom of the citizen, invent your own reason, but never admit that you do not know why he can't have what he wants."

III

To maintain good human relations the civil servant needs emotional balance. This is not easy to achieve. The citizen comes to the official because he wants something that you as a civil servant are often in a position to deprive him of, in the position of depriving him of something he desperately wants to do. If you allow yourself to become emotionally involved in the problem of each citizen you will go crazy. You will not be able to sleep at night because you will be upset by the tragic stories that they bring to you. If you do not sleep, you will be unable to deal fairly with the citizens who will come to you tomorrow. On the other hand, we must remain aware that each citizen is bringing to us his most crucial problem. If

² Alfred H. Stanton and Morris S. Schwartz, *The Mental Hospital: A Study of Institutional Participation in Psychiatric Illness and Treatment*, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1954, pp. 282, 251, 77.

we allow ourselves to get to the point where a citizen is just another "case", another "docket", another "file number", have we not failed to deal with the citizen's problem as we should?

The public servant is always in a tension of social forces. On the one hand, his mandate is to conduct public affairs expeditiously, efficiently, economically; to carry out the will of the people as expressed in the legislative mandate under which he is acting. On the other hand, it is equally the role of the public servant to make the citizen feel that his interest is being regarded. It is not enough that justice be done; the citizen must *feel* that justice is being done. In other words, to carry out the mandate that the elected representatives of the people have imposed on the civil servant, he must achieve the consent of the governed. He must serve the ultimate purpose of an "efficient" government, the realisation of the individuality of the citizen.

A few years ago I attended a congress of the International Association of Legal Science. I was the only person in the group who was not an administrative lawyer; I was 'Exhibit A', the general administrator. There were perhaps twenty of us from fifteen different countries. As we debated the central theme of maintaining the balance between the execution of the public will and the protection of the right of the individual, there came into view a tradition in the United States that a citizen is entitled to a hearing before the government acts against him. In my country it is deemed a precious right that the citizen can face the official who is about to deprive him of his liberty or penalize him for his act. This tradition was incomprehensible to an earnest, serious, broadminded European jurist, a member of the Council of State of his country. He could not see the importance of this confrontation because the ultimate decision would be made by someone higher in the hierarchy on the written *dossier* in which there would merely be a minute of the hearing.

The next morning the Councillor of State said he had been pondering over my venture into "sociological jurisprudence" and he offered this interpretation: Evidently in the United States the citizen does not feel that justice

has been done him unless he can face the official. Under the European continental system, this would be deemed a waste of time for a busy official. The Councillor of State thought that the difference must be that in his country the citizen grew up with the expectation that his rights were adequately safeguarded if he was permitted to retain a lawyer who was allowed to submit a written statement on his behalf which would be included in the *dossier*. I do not say which system is better. I say merely that the difference in procedure was attributed by the European jurist to the different expectations of the citizens.

There is a similar difference between the United States and the United Kingdom in the framing of administrative rules and regulations. In my country, before the adoption of such rules by a Ministry there would be a hearing in which interested groups would have an opportunity to present their reasons why the draft rules should be modified or should not be put into force. Such a hearing is apparently unknown in Great Britain. Senior members of the British administrative class have explained to me that theirs is a smaller, close-knit society. The officials in Whitehall feel that they have adequate knowledge of the various interest groups that would be affected by the draft regulations. The Ministry will circulate the draft and request written comment from the groups that they identify as concerned in the matter. Again it is not the expectation in Britain that justice has failed unless there is an opportunity for oral presentation.

My sympathy is all with the American officials. Even in the great city of New York, on the adoption of an important bye-law, the governing body will sometimes sit until after midnight while hundreds of people parade before them arguing why this bye-law should not be adopted. I do not claim that there is virtue in this process. It is certainly exhausting to the official. I offer the illustration merely to emphasise the expectation of the citizen in my country that the public official has not given him the opportunity to which he feels that he is entitled unless he can be heard personally. I offer these several examples of the tension of forces within which the civil servant must carry out the

public business. In whatever way is appropriate, he must give the citizen the sense that he is having his fair day in court, his fair opportunity to be heard.

How does the public servant achieve the sense of inner security that enables him to deal fairly and sympathetically with the citizen, yet without such emotional engagement that he loses his own sense of balance? When I say "security" I hope that I am understood. I am not talking about superannuation or sick leave; I am talking of an emotional state. The man on top, the senior person who is directing a large enterprise, must especially be able to radiate this sense that he is in control, that he sees the problem whole, that he can put the difficulties of his staff in their larger setting.

I served during the war as one of eight regional directors for one of the emergency war ministries. My Chief happily was a professional and personal friend of long standing so that our relationship was pleasant. In the course of one of my visits to Washington, I put before him problems of my region which seemed to me to be insoluble. I said to him, "You know, the greatest thing you do for me is to set my difficulties in perspective. When a problem seems to me insoluble, you give me the assurance that you are aware of the difficulty, that you are already taking steps with the Congress to have a new bill introduced or that you are working out necessary arrangements with the control agencies—the Budget Bureau, the Comptroller-General, the War Production Board. You send me back refreshed because you give me the sense that you see my problems in a larger perspective."

Then I said, "You in turn, I assume, can get similar support by taking the problems of war housing to the President of the United States, who in turn may say, 'We cannot do what you want now because the military tell me that they need the copper so badly that we cannot spare it for housing, but we are taking steps in the next six months to assure you of the materials you need.'" In other words, just as my Chief could give me the sense that he saw the total problem, he, as one who sat with the cabinet, would in turn get this sense from the President.

Then we amused ourselves by speculating : where does the President get this kind of support? Where can he turn for inner security? When I put this question to my students, they think they are funny when they say "Mrs. Roosevelt". Despite Mrs. Roosevelt's profession that she never sought to influence her husband, it is amply demonstrated that she was enormously helpful in giving him the inner sense of security. Others will say the President could gain this sense by prayer and I am certain that a deeply religious man would find support in prayer. One experienced administrator suggested to me that the office of the Presidency itself gave the sense of security. If you have ultimate responsibility, if you exercise it and the results come out all right more often than not, you will gain a sense of inner security.

IV

I have been suggesting that the human relations of the administrator include not only his general public but the members of his own organisation. We might well ask what kind of organisation will promote better human relations of the administrator. My own favourite definition of organisation may differ somewhat from that in many of the text books. I suggest that organisation is an arrangement of human beings to achieve common purposes effectively with satisfaction to those affected, both within and without the enterprise.³

A few years ago I took part in a conference on administrative medicine in mental health. I was the only person in the room who was not a director of a government mental health service, State or Federal, or the head of a large mental hospital. I again was 'Exhibit A', the General Administrator. Naturally they assumed that the administrative problems of mental hospitals were unique. I tried to suggest that the group could profit by noting some of the organisational arrangements of the General Motors Corporation.

³ See John M. Gaus, "A Theory of Organization in Public Administration" In John M. Gaus, Leonard D. White, Marshall E. Dimock, *The Frontiers of Public Administration*. University of Chicago Press, 1936, pp. 66, 69.

This proposal was rejected on the ground that General Motors is concerned with things, not with peoples; they were concerned with human beings. I am afraid I had little success in getting these psychiatrists to see that General Motors was profoundly concerned with people—employees, stockholders, customers. They happen to use a production line to satisfy human needs just as mental hospitals use electric shock treatment or an occupational workshop to satisfy human needs. If people were not satisfied with General Motors' automobiles, the production line would quickly grind to a stop.⁴

If my analysis is valid, we must regard the clerk at the counter who faces the citizen as the front line of administration; all the rest of us behind him are merely the supporting services of supply. Our question then becomes how can we arm the man who daily faces the citizen so that he can deal with the citizen in terms of good relations. My answer is that we must respond flexibly to the human drives, the human motivations of the persons within the organisation if they are expected to maintain good human relations with the citizen.

One of the first of the human needs of the men within the organisation is to know what they are doing and why they are doing it. We were shown yesterday "documentary" films, educational non-theatrical films. The phrase "documentary" was invented about thirty-five years ago by some young Englishmen, John Grierson and Louis Rotha, who first conceived of the use of the moving-picture camera for this purpose. It may not be widely known that these young men were given one of their first opportunities by Sir Henry Bunbury, Comptroller of the General Post Office, who saw the possibilities of explaining to the public, through the medium of the film, the variety of postal services. Grierson produced a film about the postal savings system which showed the entire process of handling a citizen's deposit from the time he presented money at the counter, with all the different steps involved up to the point of the withdrawal

⁴ George S. Stevenson, Ed. *Transactions of the Fifth Conference on Administrative Medicine*. New York, The Josiah Macy, Jr. Foundation, 1958, p. 117.

of the funds. This film was intended for use with trade union groups, church groups or other Societies to which it could carry the message of the postal savings system.

Unexpectedly it turned out that the most effective use of this film was among the thousands of employees of the postal savings system. For the first time, each clerk discovered the place of his small step in the total process. The film gave him a greater sense of the meaning of his action.

May I offer an example from my own experience in what might be considered the administrative class of United States civil service. As a regional director, I visited the headquarters of my Ministry in Washington about once a month; on my return I brought together the professional staff to report on my observations. After a while the woman in charge of a pool of shorthand typists asked me whether I would not let her girls listen to the less technical parts of my report. She told me that the typists were embarrassed when playing cards or meeting socially with their friends not to be able to explain the working of the organisation by which they were employed. They too wanted a sense of knowing what they were doing and why they were doing it. At that moment I realised that I was not making effective use of a whole group of potential "public relations" staff who could interpret the role of my Ministry to citizens who would probably never be reached by formal propaganda.

Similarly, in all my administrative roles I have found a great utility in taking my personal private secretary into my confidence; investing the time to explain why I was dictating a letter, what the problem was that we were trying to solve. This investment has often paid me good dividends. I remember once asking my personal secretary in the war days, "What has happened to the Mayor of that city in New Jersey who was telephoning me almost daily with his demands for more housing? I haven't heard from him in a week; has he died?" "Oh no," replied my secretary modestly, "he has telephoned two or three times this week, but I thought I knew enough about the situation so that I could take care of his complaint without bothering you."

V

Another human need of the public servant is not only to know what he is doing but to feel that he has been consulted, that he has had some participation in shaping the activities of the organisation. I myself have freely used the device of the staff conference. I know many other administrators who think of them as a terrible waste of time. Indeed the time of the group will be wasted if you permit two members of the staff to debate an issue that concerns only those two. You must invite them to go outside and settle that matter between them. But if you bring up in the staff meeting matters that concern the whole staff, you will find that you are satisfying a deep human need.

I recall once when my office was faced with the prospect of assuming a new set of duties, putting to my professional staff the question whether we should recruit another group of people with a special skill for the new tasks or whether the existing staff wished to take on the additional responsibilities. I had my own private thought that it would be wiser to recruit another group with the special skill but I could see that my present staff might feel that their role would be diminished if they visited the Mayor with whom they had existing relations and the Mayor would say, "What are you here for? I talked to a man from your Agency yesterday."

One after another of my staff said, "I think we should do this new task ourselves". This was not the answer that I wanted. I faced embarrassment if to close the discussion I had to say, "This is all very nice, but I am sorry, we are going to do it the other way". It took all the self control that I possessed to sit on my hands until finally the ninth or tenth man—almost the last to speak—said, "Fellows! you are crazy if you want to take on this new responsibility. We are not skilled in this. This is not anything that we can do". He made my speech for me. His word carried conviction with his fellows. If I had imposed my decision on them from above, I am confident, they would not have felt the same sense of participation in making the decision.

The most remarkable example of staff involvement in which I have ever taken part was during my service as a consultant to Dr. Brock Chisholm, the first Director-General of the World Health Organisation. Dr. Chisholm had been Major-General in charge of medical services in the Canadian Army and Deputy Minister of Health of Canada; but interestingly his medical background was in psychiatry—in short he was schooled in human relations.

During the period of my consultation a most important decision had been put into effect : that proposals for action by this international intergovernmental body would originate in six regional offices around the world : (one of them here in Delhi of which Dr. Mani is Regional Director). Dr. Chisholm had come to the conclusion that men at headquarters in Geneva, however wise, would not know as well as men in Delhi or Manila or Alexandria the needs of the countries in their part of the world for improvement of public health. This proposal was greatly upsetting to the experts in Geneva. I recall one of them who said, "Are we to be the rubber stamp for the halfbaked ideas of amateurs in the field?" The worry of the headquarters group was what their new role would be when they could not initiate action and make decisions but could only review proposals initiated in Copenhagen, Washington or Brazzaville.

Dr. Chisholm met regularly every week or two with the directors of his fifteen or twenty headquarters divisions. It was proposed that one of the directors prepare a paper on the new role for submission to a directors' meeting. A very wise woman (who, interestingly, was in charge of health education of the public) suggested that, instead of a position paper by one man to be reviewed by twenty directors, there be a common discussion of the problem by the entire professional staff at headquarters. Dr. Chisholm gave his approbation and a committee was set up to organise the discussion. A staff of about one hundred twenty was broken up into six smaller discussion groups. Dr. Chisholm closed down the headquarters of WHO for a day or two : no letters dictated, no cablegrams answered, no visitors received. The whole staff spent a day and a half in groups of about twenty, talking out together what they saw as their new

role in the changed setting. We selected a chairman and a reporter for each of the groups. In a little briefing session, one of the earnest young Doctors who was to serve as reporter for one of the discussion groups asked, "But suppose that the six groups come up with six different conclusions? How will we ever put them together into one statement?" I replied, "Doctor, don't worry. They must come out at the same place because there is only one possible answer. There are half a dozen people at WHO who could draft the conclusions right now. The six groups will come out at the same place."

In fact they did. The report that they presented to the Director-General after the six meetings was the report that almost anyone in this room could have written as a professional student of administration. But I hope that you sense the tremendous difference. In this case the group affected formulated the statement; Dr. Chisholm did not have to impose his decision. As a result of the discussions, the men involved understood what it was they were being asked to do.

VI

I have been stressing, as examples of good human relations within organisation, the importance of a free flow of ideas toward the top. One finds differing attitudes in different countries. I know of a country in which the United Nations was helping in the establishment of a national training school in public administration. One of the United Nations' staff interviewed permanent undersecretaries of ministries, asking them to encourage some of their younger staff to give up their evenings of card-playing with their friends in order to study and work hard so that they could improve themselves as administrators. One of the senior undersecretaries replied, "This is an excellent idea. I shall certainly recommend to some of my men that they take the courses, but you men from the United Nations must not expect early results from your training. It is not an acceptable tradition in our country that younger men should make suggestions to their seniors. In fifteen years or so, when

the graduates of your training school have achieved senior posts, you may expect to see the results of your training."

Even within my own country I have known administrators who could not tolerate having around them people, each of whom knew better something that the Chief did not know. I served once in an office which was supposed to have brought together the very best experts in many areas of the national economy. After a while I asked one of the senior men, "Don't we ever have staff meetings; how do I find out what is being done in other divisions?" It seemed that staff meetings had been abandoned because the Chief did not enjoy sitting at the head of the table with the sense that there were people around him each one of whom knew more about something than he did so that he could not dominate the meeting. I am sure you will agree with me that he misread his role—to serve as catalyzer. I offer by contrast the statement that the Chancellor in one of our great Universities once made to me, "If I have had any success it is because I have been able to persuade men better than I am to come to work for me". A similar statement is attributed to Andrew Carnegie who made hundred of millions of dollars in the steel business.

If you wish to be human though an administrator, when do you issue orders? I once heard a field officer in the United States Navy remark that he could not remember ever giving an order. One of my friends, a distinguished New York lawyer, was called to Washington during the war to do high level staff work in the office of the Secretary of War and made a Major-General. He told me that he learned to his embarrassment not to think aloud. It seems that when a Major-General mutters, "I wonder if it might be a good idea..."—the thing is done before he can draw another breath. It seems to be relevant to mention here a sage reflection by a distinguished United States public servant and philosopher of administration who had just returned to India, this time to give a course of lectures at this Institute of Public Administration, Dr. Paul H. Appleby. After Dr. Appleby had been Undersecretary of Agriculture, while he was Assistant Director of the United States Bureau of the Budget, he brought his background as an able journalist to

some essays on problems of bureaucracy in a large state. One of the problems upon which he mused was how a new government of the day could change the policy direction of a Ministry with 90,000 employees. Would the new Minister make heads roll? How many people would it be necessary to dismiss in order to assure that this great Ministry would move in a new direction. It is Paul Appleby's considered judgment that the new Minister would need to bring in thirty to forty people responsive to his new ideas but to dismiss more than that number would damage the Ministry so that it would not recover for several years.⁵

The impulse to give orders as evidence of being an executive may be based upon a misunderstanding of relationships within an organisation. May I quote the statement of a great industrial executive talking to an audience of civil servants in Washington on "The Relation of Organisation to Management". Mr. Edgar W. Smith was the Vice-President of General Motors Export Corporation. He explained the three types of contacts and relations that prevailed between various strata of his organisation. In discussing "staff" and "line" officers, he noted that there was only one person in the organisation who always acted in a "line" capacity, the President. All others found themselves involved in three types of contacts and relations: "First, lines of direct authority; second, lines of informational and advisory contact; and third, lines of delegated authority. The successful day-to-day operation of our business demands a great deal of commonsense and good business judgment in the exercise of these contacts."⁶

This may sound like an unscientific formulation, but I assure you that it is the higher wisdom. The public servant will find himself from hour to hour or even within the same conversation moving from the giving or receiving of orders to the giving or receiving of advice. It is the ultimate

⁵ Paul H. Appleby, *Big Democracy*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1945, p. 148.

⁶ *Administrative Management: Principles and Techniques*. A series of lectures delivered and published by the Graduate School, United States Department of Agriculture, Washington, 1938, p. 63.

wisdom to use a great deal of commonsense in distinguishing these relationships.

One of my lifetime friends and professional associates directed, during the war, a federal bureau with more than 25,000 employees who worked all over the United States. In my official travels I met many of his field workers and I brought him evidence from time to time that some of them were making statements or taking actions that could hardly have his approval. His answer was, "I have no doubt that these things happen. I have a Deputy Director for Field Operations. I believe that he is exceptionally well qualified, but if there are too many mistakes in the field, I shall get myself another deputy. There is no way in which I can intervene, because as head of the bureau I find that five-sixths of my time is spent in external relations : negotiations with the Director of the Budget for the authorization of funds, appearing before parliamentary committees to press the case for appropriations, negotiations with the Comptroller-General or the Civil Service Commission for favourable rulings, dealing with the representatives of trade unions and employers and the rest."

This same thought was well formulated by Donald C. Stone, now Dean of the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh, formerly Director of Administration for the Marshall Plan and the Assistant Director for Management of the United States Bureau of the Budget : "The role of the executive is to create an environment in which his staff can carry out their work."

The last thought that I put before you is a statement of a very wise American administrator, David E. Lilienthal, the great creative Chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority and Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission. I hope that many of you are encouraged to read his remarkable little book "T.V.A.—Democracy on the March", which is a great moral tract, the testament of a great spirit.⁷ After having directed these two innovative public organisations, Mr. Lilienthal observed, "These great enterprises educate those who are supposed to be leading them."

⁷ New York, Harper & Bros, 1944.

